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AUTHOR Sullivan, Linda A.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined social support within the context of social interaction, looking at social support as a component of naturally occurring social interaction, exploring the amount of support reported as being actually received rather than the amount perceived as available, and analyzing the relationship between other components of social interaction (quality and intimacy) and social support. Seventy female and 54 male college freshmen completed a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record on which they recorded any social interaction they had which lasted 10 minutes or longer for a period of 14 days. They reported the amount of social support they received, as well as the quality and intimacy of their interactions. The results showed that social support was moderately related to quality and intimacy. The findings suggest that various aspects of social interaction, although related, appear to be distinct from each other. Researchers of social support should be careful to specify the social variable they are studying. (Author/NB)

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The Relationship between Social Support, Interaction Quality, and Intimacy

Linda A. Sullivan

Michigan State University

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Abstract

Participants maintained a diary of their social interactions for a period of 14 days. They reported the amount of social support they received, as well as the quality and intimacy of their interactions. Results showed that social support was moderately related to quality and intimacy. It was concluded that various aspects of social interaction, although related, appear to be distinct from each other. Therefore, researchers of social support should be careful to specify the social variable they are studying.

The Relationship between Social Support, Interaction Quality, and Intimacy

This paper reports preliminary analyses from a study conducted on social support within the context of social interactions. The study extends previous work (see Cohen & Wills, 1985, for a review) on social support in a number of ways. First, it examines social support as a component of naturally occurring social interaction. Second, the study examines the amount of support reported as being actually received rather than the amount perceived as avail able. Third, it permits analyses of the relationship between other components of social interaction (e.g., quality and intimacy) and social support.

This report will present analyses concerning one aspect of the study: the relationship between the quality of the interaction, the intimacy of the interaction, and the amount of support received during the interaction. Previous research has measured various aspects of social interaction and labelled these aspects as support (e.g., Ganellan & Blaney, 1984; Procidano & Heller, 1983). It is argued here that researchers must be specific about the measures of social interaction they use as these measures may be distinct from support.

It was expected that the present results would show a moderate relationship between the components of quality, intimacy, and support, given that all these variables could be considered to pertain to positive relatedness with another person.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 70 female and 54 male freshmen Introductory Psychology students who participated in partial fulfillment of their course requirements.

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977) on which they recorded any social interaction they had lasting ten minutes or longer for a period of 14 days. Interaction was defined as any behavior in which two or more people are responding to one another. As can be seen in Figure 1, measures on the RIR included a) the extent to which the subject received support from their cointeractant(s), b) the quality of the interaction, and c) the intimacy of the interaction. Support was defined as a feeling of being loved, accepted or cared about, or a feeling that one is valued, trusted, respected, or held in esteem (cf Cobb, 1976). Quality was defined as the degree of pleasantness of the interaction. Intimacy was defined as the degree of closeness felt during the interaction. See Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) for a full description of the instructions provided to subjects.

Results

There were significant positive relationships for both sexes between the intimacy of the interaction and the support received (females $r(69)=.42$, $p < .01$; males $r(53)=.29$, $p < .05$). Results also showed positive relationships between the quality of interactions and support received for both sexes (females $r(69)=.34$, $p < .01$, males $r(53)=.30$, $p < .01$). Tables 1 and 2 show the correlates for the various compositions of interaction.

The correlates in Table 1 suggest that the relationships between support and intimacy were not as strong for males as they were for females, although these differences would not be significant given the size of the sample. Also suggested is that the strongest relationship between these variables occurs for the best friend of the opposite-sex, for both sexes. Further, males' same-sex cointeractants appear to be close friends before intimacy and support are related. Of course, these patterns remain to be tested for significance with a larger sample.

Discussion

As House and Kahn (1985) note, there have been three popular approaches to the study of social support: (1) documenting the existence of social relationships, (2) conducting social network analyses, and (3) measuring the functional aspects of support. The present results suggest that researchers be careful in their operationalization of support. Clearly, support was related to both intimacy and quality, however, the magnitude of these correlates show that these concepts are distinct aspects of social interaction (see also Forgas, 1976, for an empirical discussion of the attributes of social interactions). Thus researchers studying support from a network or

functional approach are obligated to specify the variable they are measuring and not label that variable as support if that variable is clearly more indicative of another aspect of social interaction. The results also suggest that the relationships of support with quality and intimacy were affected by the sex and closeness of the interactants.

Much work has been conducted on the relationship between social support and well-being (see Cohen & Wills, 1985, for a review) and has shown this relationship to be positive. Yet researches do not know how these variables affect each other. By specifying the social variable being examined and accounting for sex and closeness of cointeractants, future work will more accurately assess the relationship between social interaction and well-being.

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Table 1
Relationship between Support Received and Intimacy of Interaction for Different Categories of Interaction

	Overall	Same	Opp	S1	S2	O1	O2
Females	.42	.32	.61	.38	.54	.78	.57
Males	.29	.13	.35	.24	.44	.50	.36

Table 2
Relationship between Quality of Interaction and Support Received across Different Categories of Interaction

	Overall	Same	Opp	S1	S2	O1	O2
Females	.34	.25	.53	.22	.33	.47	.47
Males	.30	.29	.37	.32	.05	.62	.39

Note. For females n = 70; the .05 level of significance is $r = |.21|$. For males n = 54; the .05 level of significance is $r = |.23|$. Same = same-sex cointeractants. Opp = Opposite-sex cointeractants. S1, O1 = Same, opposite-sex best friend interaction. S2, O2 = Same, opposite-sex second-best friend interaction.

Rochester Interaction Record (RIR)

Date: _____ Day: ____ Time: _____ am ___ pm ___

Length: _____ hrs _____ mins

Initials: _____ _____ _____ If more than 3 others: # of females ___

Sex: _____ _____ _____ # of males _____

Support needed or desired:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Support received:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Intimacy:	not at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very intimate
Quality:	unpleasant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very pleasant
Support provided:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot
Difficulty:	very easy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very difficult
Support other needed/desired:	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	a lot

Nature: Work/Study Socializing Relaxing Life necessity Other